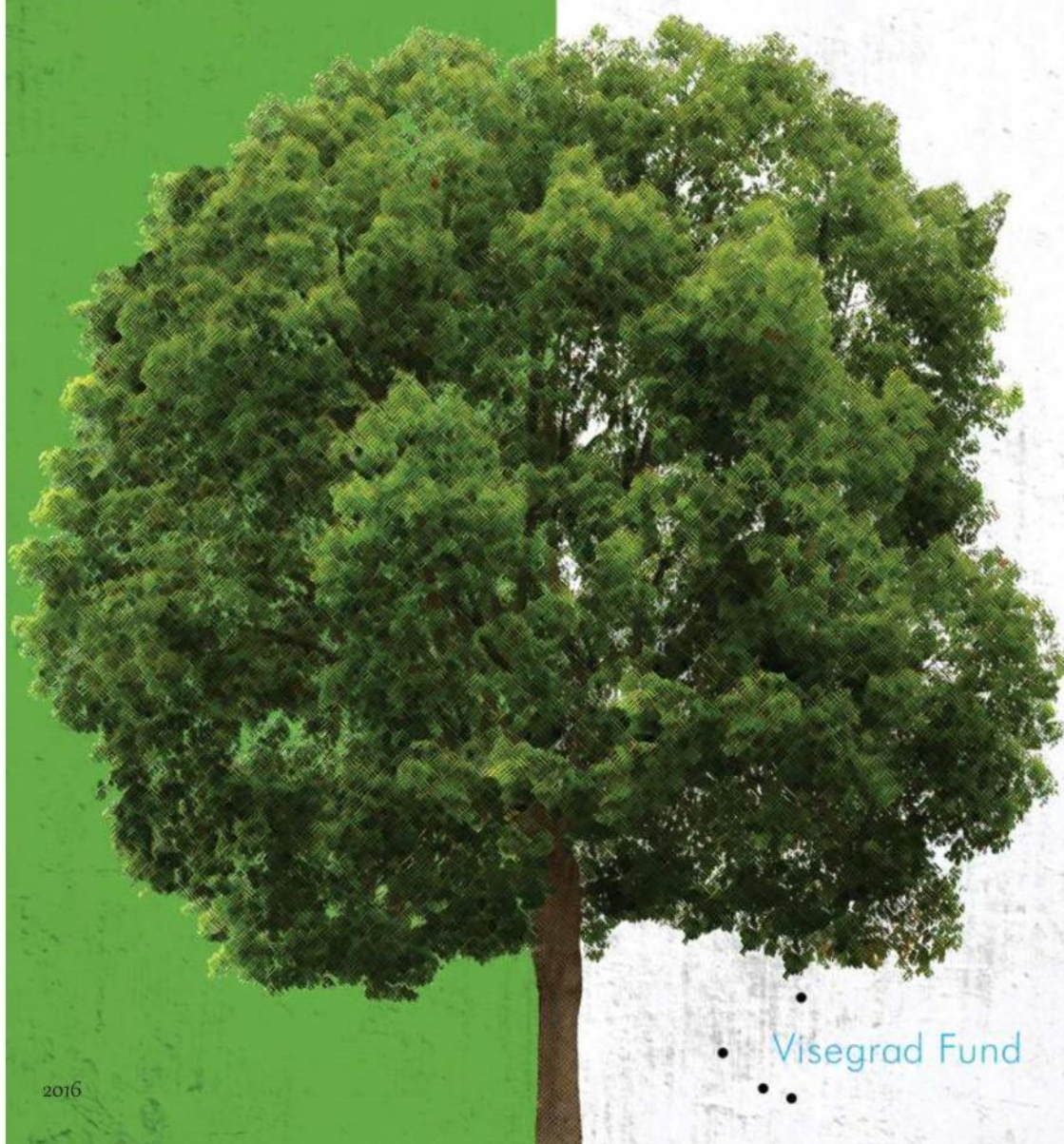


ENVIRONMENTÁLNA ETIKA V KRAJINÁCH V4

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN V4 COUNTRIES

Barbora Baďurová – Veronika Szántó – Tereza Vandrovcová – Zbigniew Wróblewski (eds.)



2016

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Visegrad Fund

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Zborník vedeckých štúdií

Proceedings of scientific studies

2016

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Zborník vyšiel vďaka finančnej podpore organizácie Visegrad fund
The proceedings has been published thanks to financial support of the organization Visegrad fund



Text neprešiel jazykovou úpravou. The text has not undergone language proof-reading.

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Obálka /Cover: Mgr. Tomáš Balon

Vydalo/ Published by: Belianum. Vydavateľstvo Univerzity Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici

Vydanie: prvé, 2016

Tlač/ Print: EQUILIBRIA, s. r. o., Košice

Náklad/ Printing: 200 kusov/ pieces

ISBN 978-80-557-1175-1

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FROM ORIGINAL SIN TO TECHNOLOGICAL REDEMPTION: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THE ORGANIC/MECHANISTIC DIVIDE IN WESTERN THOUGHT

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The problem of human attitudes towards the natural world has been ambiguous in Christian theology and it has been intertwined with questions concerning human freedom, morality, and history. Throughout Western thought these topics have been reinterpreted many times. I trace some of the intellectual developments leading up to early-20th century German philosophy of technology.

Keywords: technology, theology, Oswald Spengler, Ernst Jünger

1. The Myth of Creation

„...and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” – predicted enigmatically the devil in the shape of a serpent in the Book of Genesis, thereby posing a hardly resolvable riddle to the first human couple. Why is the ability to distinguish good from evil associated with sin, the original sin? Is not this ability precisely that which makes a human being the image of God? Is not the capacity for moral insight that which separates human beings from the rest of creation? If humans are sinful, God himself must be complicit too, because it is the Creator himself who inserted the role of the serpent into the drama played out in Paradise – says indignantly Omar Khayyam whose resigned scepticism often makes him sound as our contemporary.

Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give—and take!

(Omar Khayyam: Rubaiyat, translation: Edward FitzGerald)

According to Paul Ricoeur, the paradox of the biblical human condition consists in the inseparability of the possibility of freedom from the possibility of sin (Ricoeur, 1960). It gives

an answer to the question how could evil take root in an absolutely good world. This problem has posed a considerable challenge to Christian theology from the beginning. The supposition that evil is caused by an evil principle opposing God inevitably leads to religious dualism such as Manichaeism. In this scenario God is not the omnipotent creator of the universe because in the other corner of the ring there is a villain whose strength is comparable to that of God, the only relevant difference between them being that one wears a black jersey while the other wears a white one. The struggle between them has been going on indefinitely, there is no absolute and final winner. The driving force behind the great cosmic cycle is precisely this never-ending contest between light and darkness. In such a metaphysical framework salvation history cannot really be conceived, and in a dualistic world sin assumes a different status from the one it assumes in monotheism. As evidenced by the Genesis myth, dualism lurks in the deep layers of the Jewish-Christian tradition, but by the transformation of Lucifer into a fallen angel Christianity could eventually handle the problem.

But there remained a problem for theology to solve: how can sin arise from the free agency of human beings? How is it compatible with divine omnipotence of which divine foreknowledge is a necessary part? If God had foreseen the Fall, why did not he prevent it? If he had not foreseen it, then he is not omnipotent. The elderly, pessimistic St. Augustine thought that the Fall had been a break point: before that, humans had been able to deliberate and act without sin, after that, due to humanity's depraved nature, they are no longer capable of it. Freedom before the original sin had been the freedom to stay away from sin. Freedom after the original sin has been joined to sin. If it were not so, there were no starting point of the salvation history and there were no redemption. The whole metaphysical construct would fall apart.

From our present perspective the most interesting aspect of this enduring, subtle problem of moral theology is the relationship between morality and freedom. This apparently abstract philosophical and theological problem is loaded with serious practical ecological and bioethical implications. The biblical creation myth delineates the metaphysical framework within which the European civilization, rooted as it is in the Jewish-Christian theological tradition, developed its ethical attitude towards nature. In the myth the human beings are granted their place within the order of nature. They become similar to their Creator, while they are confronted with the realm of animals: only human beings possess an immortal soul and only they possess the freedom of action. The two is related: animals do not possess souls, therefore they are not free. They are incapable of moral actions. They are unable to perform morally right or wrong actions. They are not sinful or evil, what they do is morally indifferent.

The relationship between humans and soulless animals falls outside the scope of morality too, cruelty to animals is not a sin as they are not moral persons, humans do not have to make moral considerations about them.

The dismal consequences of this attitude manifested themselves only during the centuries of modernity, because, as it was shown by Aron Gurevich (1990) during the Middle Ages abstract theological speculation and popular notions diverged considerably. Forms of animism rooted in pre-Christian paganism had been permeating popular consciousness, loosening strict monotheism and providing passages between the human and the animal world. In the folkloristic and popular imagination as well as in medieval art, evil took on an animal form and appeared as bestiality. Facts of medieval life also played a role in this development. In an age when Europe was still covered with huge areas of pristine forests, animals still posed a realistic threat for human lives. People would have been surprised at modernity's program aiming at the mastery of nature. Thus, in the Middle Ages, animals assume a paradox quality: they are God's creatures, innocent and sinless beings, yet on the other hand they represent the evil, the radical Other, something radically alien from the human being.

2. From Francis of Assisi to Romanticism

The theology of St. Francis represented an attempt to integrate the popular animistic-holistic attitude with theology. For him, the sphere of solidarity encompasses the entire created world, he addresses Brother Sun and Sister Moon, he preaches to insects and fish, he negotiates peace with the wolf of Gubbio. Yet this attempt was discontinued after his death and his achievement remained a dead-end for a long time. In the early modernity any chance that the Franciscan attitude might become the paradigm for the attitude to nature dissipated for good because of a complex set of interrelated developments that had took place in Europe, including the rise of capitalism, the religious wars and the birth of modern natural sciences. The role played by the new science and the new scientific worldview has been emphasized by many authors. Lewis Mumford writes about intellectual imperialism, which regards any territory beyond the human world as a territory to be subdued and conquered, and whose key word was power (Mumford, 1970, 118–9). Mechanics, the leading science of the early modern age provided an all-encompassing worldview and a universal explanatory device by means of which everything could be given a mechanical account from the cosmos itself to the animals. According to this novel mechanical notion animals are intricate machines created by God. And although Descartes' ideas concerning animals are more sophisticated than they are

often presented, it is safe to conclude that this mechanical worldview held no place for animal suffering.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a forerunner of Romanticism and an early expositor of the problems inherent in the presuppositions of Cartesian rationalism embraced an ambivalent position. He thinks that although animals lack reason and thus freedom, yet as sentient, divinely created beings humans have moral obligations toward them. Rousseau accepts that animals as well as human beings are intricate machines but after some metaphysical and moral considerations he arrives at the conclusion that the decisive difference between the animal machine and the human machine is freedom: "I see nothing in any animal but an ingenious machine, to which nature hath given senses to wind itself up, and to guard itself, to a certain degree, against anything that might tend to disorder or destroy it. I perceive exactly the same things in the human machine, with this difference, that in the operations of the brute, nature is the sole agent, whereas man has some share in his own operations, in his character as a free agent" (Rousseau, 1923, 184).

Romanticism, as an antidote to Enlightenment's abstract Cartesian rationalism, promoted the individual instead of the general, sentiments instead of reason, organic nature instead of mechanical artificiality. But as the wheel of history could not be turned back, and the technological development that started in the 18th century and reached its highest rate in the 19th blurred all the hitherto well-defined concepts, a general re-conceptualisation was indispensable.

3. Victorian Anxieties

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was published in 1818. The well-known book which soon became part and parcel of popular culture is much more than an entertaining neo-Gothic horror story. Behind the spine-chilling storyline lurks the problem concerning the boundary between the natural and the artificial, and a number of moral dilemmas that today we would call bioethical problems. Mary Shelley anticipates problems which, in the age of the steam engine, only began to articulate themselves, and which became acutely pressing only in the age of biotechnology. Yet, contemporary early 19th science provided inspiration as well. According to a widely accepted view Shelley was inspired, beyond German folkloristic ghost stories, by a professor of the University of Glasgow, Andrew Ure (1778–1857) who conducted experiments on a hanged man.

The book's protagonist, Victor Frankenstein wanted to recapitulate the act of creation: he composed an artificial man out of the organs of dead people. For Shelley, Frankenstein

represented the Prometheus of modernity, by no means a positive character, who embodies the unrestrained hubris of the modern world, promoter of a godless science, whose vanity makes him forget that his creature might free himself under his control. The lesson is straightforward: science is not pure blessing. The story has a strong moral dimension. When the monster meets his Frankenstein, he takes his maker to task for what he has done. The artificial creature is sinless, he is motivated only by the instinct of self-preservation: "Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it. Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine; my joints more supple. (...) Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous" (Wollstonecraft Shelley, 1823, 206).

A general sentiment shared by many Victorian thinkers is that the age in which they are living is the age of the metaphysical opposition of the organic and the mechanical principle. The Scottish Thomas Carlyle put it succinctly: "Were we required to characterize this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word (...)" (Carlyle, 1829, 441-2).

The organic vs. machine opposition is a popular theme in the Victorian philosophy and literature (Sussmann, 1968). John Stuart Mill also regarded it as fundamental: "Supposing it were possible to get houses built, corn grown, battles fought, causes tried, and even churches erected and prayers said, by machinery—by automatons in human form—it would be a considerable loss to exchange for these automatons even the men and women who at present inhabit the more civilized parts of the world, and who assuredly are but starved specimens of what nature can and will produce. Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing." (Mill, 1864, 106–7).

The story of Frankenstein has shown how the boundary between the natural and the artificial might be transgressed. By the second half of the 19th century, with the increasing popularity of Darwinism, more and more authors strove to find the norms of human conduct in the realm of nature. But everything depended on how one conceived nature itself.

4. Ideological Justification

From different conceptions of nature contradictory ethical norms can be derived. While for Prince Kropotkin mutual help is the highest law of nature and he makes it the highest ethical principle, social-Darwinists regard nature as an arena of ceaseless struggle for survival. The bloody battle of 'tooth and claw' is what drives evolution forward. According to them, human conduct must be governed by the ethical maxim prescribing survival in this struggle. According to Mumford, the popularity of Darwin's theory arises partly from the social milieu of the age. The alleged struggle for survival is not merely a model describing natural processes but the projection of the social reality of 19th century onto nature, and thus a justification of this reality. Natural selection's social-Darwinist interpretation sanctioned the greed, ruthlessness and inhumanity of the contemporary industrial society. It provided end-of-the-century imperialism with ideological support, justifying the exploitation of colonies and the oppression of native people. These phenomena are, after all, only manifestations of the natural law in society: the stronger, fitter species subdues the weak and the unfit. According to Mumford Darwin himself was also partially culpable for this interpretation, because he failed to make a distinction between the fact of survival (which, beyond fitness, depends on a lot of factors) and development, that is, between mere adaptation and perfection. In the eyes of his contemporaries, Darwin became the constructor of a widely popular mythology.

Following World War I, the problem of machines, humankind and nature became acute and pressing. This was the first total technological war in history, which laid the foundations of today's global techno-civilization. Beside the monster-man assembled from dead body parts, a novel freak made its appearance in modern urban folklore: the product of the symbiosis between human and machine, the cyborg. And with it the motive of soulless intelligence arose. Should we regard machines with fear or with admiration?

Weimarian Germany played a major role in this intellectual development. The post-war crisis of modernity functioned as a peculiar magnifying lens: it enlarged *fin-de-siècle* critiques of modernity and put them in new dimensions. What had amounted to a marginal, elitist game of mind at the end of the 19th century became a general spirit of the age after the war. The most renowned expression of this new post-war spirit is Oswald Spengler's (1880–1936) *Decline of the West*. The first volume of the book became a bestseller in 1920. German readers felt the book was about themselves. Its reception was facilitated by Spengler's simple and suggestive style, which was a far cry from the obscure language of German philosophy. Spengler was able to articulate his thoughts in an audience-friendly manner. He was influenced by the ideas of the conservative revolution and the German

critiques of modernity.¹ He does not address ecology directly, but his major structural principle is the opposition between culture and civilization, between nature and artificiality, between organicism and mechanism, between soul and spirit.

5. The Faustian Inventor

In Spengler's vision the age of new cesarism inevitably ushers in when the lords of money are defeated and are replaced by a new elite embodying the power of blood and soil. In Spengler, however, the organicist social vision does not involve anti-individualist collectivism. For him, the greatest virtue of this new elite is heroism, an echo of Romanticism's hero-worship. The tension between the rejection of rationalism and the endorsement of modern technology is resolved by deriving technology from the organic and intuitive genius of the inventor, instead of mechanical rationalism. According to Spengler, the machine, which is an expression of the will to power, is the product of Faustian dynamism of the Western world: "Der abendländische will die Welt nach seinem Willen lenken. Der faustische Erfinder und Entdecker ist etwas Einziges. Die Urgewalt seines Wollens, die Leuchtkraft seiner Visionen, die stählerne Energie seines praktischen Nachdenkens müssen jedem, der aus fernen Kulturen herüberblickt, unheimlich und unverständlich sein, aber sie liegen uns allen im Blute. (...) Die *scientia experimentalis*, wie zuerst Roger Bacon die Naturforschung definiert hatte, die gewaltsame Befragung der Natur mit Hebeln und Schrauben beginnt, was als Ergebnis in den mit Fabrikschloten und Fördertürmen übersäten Ebenen der Gegenwart vor unsern Augen liegt. (...) Sie erlagen diesem Ehrgeiz immer wieder; sie zwangen der Gottheit ihr Geheimnis ab, um selber Gott zu sein. (...) Die Maschine ist des Teufels: so hat der echte Glaube immer wieder empfunden. (...) Auf Kolumbus und Kopernikus folgen das Fernrohr, das Mikroskop, die chemischen Elemente und endlich die ungeheure Summe der technischen Verfahren des frühen Barock. (...) Dann aber folgt zugleich mit dem Rationalismus die Erfindung der *Dampfmaschine*, die alles umstürzt (...) Bis dahin hatte die Natur Dienste geleistet, jetzt wird sie als *Sklavin* ins Joch gespannt (...) Um der Maschine willen wird das Menschenleben kostbar. *Arbeit* wird das große Wort des ethischen Nachdenkens" (Spengler, 1922, 627–629).

Technicization is the consequence of humankind's break-away from nature. Spengler discerns the hubris in the demand of domination, yet he approves it. He is nostalgic about medieval rural life where the works of the human hand organically fitted in the natural world, yet he is straightforwardly enthusiastic about the greatness of technology ensnaring the whole

¹ On the concept of the conservative revolution, see Mohler, 1995.

planet. His euphoric description of the post-human world is reminiscent of Marinetti: "Es ist das hinaus- und hinaufdrängende und eben deshalb der Gotik tief verwandte Lebensgefühl. (...) Die trunkene Seele will Raum und Zeit überfliegen. Eine unnennbare Sehnsucht lockt in grenzenlose Fernen. (...) Man möchte sich von der Erde lösen, im Unendlichen aufgehen, die Bande des Körpers verlassen und im Weltraum unter Sternen kreisen. Was am Anfang die glühend hinaufschwebende Inbrunst des heiligen Bernhard suchte, was Grünewald und Rembrandt in ihren Hintergründen und Beethoven in den erdfernen Klängen seiner letzten Quartette ersannen, das kehrt nun wieder in dem durchgeistigten Rausch dieser dichten Folge von Erfindungen (...) deshalb bricht dieser Ehrgeiz der Rekorde und Dimensionen hervor, die Riesenhallen für Riesenmaschinen, ungeheure Schiffe und Brückenspannungen, wahnwitzige Bauten bis in die Wolken hinauf (...) Und diese Maschinen werden in ihrer Gestalt immer mehr entmenslicht, immer asketischer, mystischer, esoterischer. Sie umspinnen die Erde mit einem unendlichen Gewebe feiner Kräfte, Ströme und Spannungen" (Spengler, 1922, 629–630).

For Spengler these considerations entail a social-Darwinist ethic. In his late writings in which he examines the relationship between technology and humankind, the central motive is modern technological machinery. There is no trace here of the natural law of interspecies cooperation. The dominant relationship is that of a predator and its environment, in which the environment is a prey of a predatory humankind to which it is entitled by the right of might. According to Spengler, modern technology is essentially just another means in the service of the human predator. It is ultimately rooted in biology even though its development and flourishing has been dependent on a particular cultural constellation. Technology's potential could be actualized only within the Faustian culture. The inventor-engineer is a direct descendant of the Faustian magician who is able to summon the Earth's mystical powers by his incantations. Technology does not re-enchant the dull, vapidly rationalist, utilitarian world. Its purpose is not to make this world safer and more comfortable, quite to the contrary: it ushers in the age of the powerful, in which the weak are only slaves serving their lords in unconditional submission.

Spengler, the philosopher of technology and Spengler, the morphologist of culture are entangled in an irresolvable conflict. He grounds his philosophy of culture on the opposition between organic culture and mechanical civilization. Yet, in his philosophy of technology he naturalizes technology, whereby he effectively eliminates the divide between the natural and the artificial. Heidegger has been right: what Spengler did was the naturalization of Nietzsche's Übermensch-ethic.

6. Technology as an Organ

Ernst Jünger (1895–1998), another popular critic of culture in post-war Germany, also comes to the conclusion that the major consequence of World War I, a war fought by technology represented as a manifestation of nature's power, is the disappearance of the difference between the organic and the mechanical (Jünger, 1982). The post-war state of affairs is not final, the world is in a phase of transition. Presently the world is both a workshop and the museum, where the relics of a by-gone era and the structural elements of an as yet unfinished, emerging world exist side by side. His central concept is *Gestalt*, a kind of totality characterizing distinct historical periods. *Gestalt* as an archetype is beyond history, yet it determines the fundamental patterns of each particular age. In the transitional phase of Jünger's time a war was going on between the fading *Gestalt* of the bourgeois and the emerging *Gestalt* of the labourer. The world of the bourgeois and the world of the labourer differ fundamentally. Future belongs to the labourer, who is, in Jünger's eye, by no means a victim of the bourgeois. The labourer is the lord of the coming age, it is his mission to bring about it. The labourer is warrior and worker at once.

According to Jünger, in the new age of the labourer social relationships are no longer mechanistic and contractual but organic and elemental. They are determined by a martial ethic rooted in *Blut und Boden*, not by the enfeebled humanistic morality. The primary law of this ethic is the elimination of the enemy. Technology is not a neutral tool; its meaning is different for the bourgeois and the labourer. For the former, it is a protective device: it separates human beings from nature, protecting them from nature's threats, providing them a comfortable world. But this is in contradiction with the essence of technology, which tends to dissolve the bourgeois world, because technology's real function is to connect human beings with the dangerous, life-threatening world of nature. The labourer employs technology in order to merge the organic and the mechanical, not to separate them, in spite of the dangers this process involves. Jünger takes the high incidence of catastrophes as indicative of technology's bourgeois, that is, inadequate application. Technology's real nature manifests itself only in the new historical age: it is the form and mode by which the labourer's *Gestalt* mobilizes the world. Jünger effectively foretold the world's post-war globalization.

Jünger himself, at least until the beginning of the 1930s, approved of the world dominated by technology. He claimed that technology always confronts us with either/or situations. Either we accept technological innovations or we are doomed. For him, technology is not just the sum total of tools and devices but also a symbolic world. Human beings are not

only subjects of technological development, they are its objects too: technology alters their life world. Technology creates novel tensions between and within societies; it always creates new problems, whose solutions are also technological and thus predictable. The rate of change is ever increasing, this acceleration is perhaps the most conspicuous quality of the new age. The ever increasing amount of products is in a peculiar contrast with the increasing misery of ever more people. Nothing remains the same, only change itself. The unity of the organic and the mechanic becomes manifest: technology itself becomes an organ, functioning as power: the more perfect, the more organic.

Jünger's thought turned out to be prophetic in many ways. In the past few decades we managed to expand our creative capacities beyond any expectation. Yet it seems that in the process we have lost another ability for which the first human pair paid such a high price: the ability to tell right from wrong.

Translation: Veronika Szántó

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ENVIRONMENTÁLNA ETIKA V KRAJINÁCH V4

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN V4 COUNTRIES

Zborník vedeckých štúdií
Proceedings of scientific studies

Vydalo/ Published by: Belianum. Vydavateľstvo Univerzity Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici

Vydanie: prvé, 2016

Tlač/ Print: EQUILIBRIA, s. r. o., Košice

Náklad/ Printing: 200 kusov/ pieces

Počet strán/ Number of pages: 292

ISBN 978-80-557-1175-1